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The Value of Devotion

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AMONG the many forces which inspire men to activity, none, perhaps, plays a greater part than the feeling we call devotion—together with some feelings that often mask themselves under its name, though fundamentally differing from it in essence. The most heroic self-sacrifices have been inspired by it, while the most terrible sacrifices of others have been brought about by its pseudo-sister, fanaticism. It is as powerful a lever for raising a man as is the other for his degradation. The two sway mankind with overmastering power, and in some of their manifestations show an illusory resemblance; but the one has its roots in knowledge, the other in ignorance; the one bears the fruits of love, the other the poison-apples of hate.

A clear understanding of the nature of devotion is necessary, ere we are in a position to weigh its value and to distinguish it from the

false Duessa. We must trace it to its origin in human nature, and see in what part of that nature it takes its rise. We must know in order that we may practise; for as knowledge without practice is barren, so practice without knowledge is wasted. Emotion unregulated by knowledge, like a river overflowing its banks, spreads in every direction as a devastating flood, while emotion guided by knowledge is like the same river running in appointed channels and fertilising the land through which it flows.

If we study the inner nature of man, we find that it readily reveals three marked aspects that are distinguished from each other as the spiritual, the intellectual, and the emotional. On studying these further, we learn that the spiritual nature is that in which all the separate individualities inhere, that it is the common root, the unifying influence, that principle which, when developed, enables a man to realise in consciousness the oneness of all that lives. The intellectual nature may be said to be its antithesis; it is the individualising force in man, that which makes the many from the One. Its self-realisation is 'I,' and from this it sharply divides the 'not-I'. It knows itself apart, separate, and works best in isolation, drawn inwards, self-concentrated, indifferent to all without. Not herein can be found the root of devotion, of a feeling

which rushes outward; intellect can grasp, it cannot move. Remains the emotional nature, the energising force that causes action, that which feels. That it is which attracts us to an object, or repels us from it, and herein we shall find that devotion has its source. For as we study the emotional nature we see that it has two emotions—attraction and repulsion. It is ever moving us towards or away from objects surrounding us, according as those objects afford us pleasure or pain. All the feelings which draw us towards another fall under the head of attraction, and are forms of Love. All those which repel us from another fall under the head of repulsion, and are forms of Hate.

Now love takes different forms, and is called by different names, according as its object is above it, equal with it, or below it. Directed to those below it we name it pity, compassion, benevolence; directed to those equal with it, we call it friendship, passion, affection; directed to those above it, we style it reverence, adoration, devotion. Thus we trace devotion to its origin in the love-side of the emotional nature, and we define it as love directed to an object superior to the lover. When love is directed to the Teacher, to God, we rightly term it devotion; for then it is poured out before the superior, and shows in perfection the

characteristic of all love given to those who are greater than ourselves, the characteristic of self-surrender.

Here we have the touchstone by which we can separate it from the fanaticism which has inspired religious wars, religious persecutions religious animosities. These have their roots in hatred, not in love; they repel us from others instead of drawing us towards them. In the name of love to God men injure their fellows; but when we analyse the motive power of their actions we do not find it in their love, but in their sense that they are right and others wrong, in the separateness they feel from others, in the feeling of repulsion from them because of their supposed wrongness, i.e., in hate. Out of this come the bitter waters that sterilise the heart over which they flow. By this we can judge what we regard as devotion in ourselves; if it makes us humble, gentle, tolerant, friendly to all, then is it true devotion; if it makes us proud, harsh, separate, suspicious of all, then, however fair its seeming, it is dross, not gold.

Now devotion being a form of love, it can only flow out when an object presents itself which is attractive in its own nature, i.e., happiness-giving. All men seek happiness, and that attracts them, draws them towards itself, which

seems to them to make for happiness. Happiness is the feeling which accompanies the increase of life, and true and permanent bliss lies in union with the Self, the All-life, in conscious Self-identification with and expansion into the All; all efforts after happiness are efforts to unite with objects in order to absorb their life, thereby expanding the life that absorbs them. Happiness results from this union, because thereby the feeling of life is increased. Fundamentally the impulse to union comes from the Self, seeking to overpass the barriers which separate his selves on the lower planes, and the attraction between selves is the seeking by the Self in each of the Self in the other. "Lo! not for the sake of the husband is the husband dear, but for the sake of the Self the husband is dear. Lo! not for the sake of the wife is the wife dear, but for the sake of the Self the wife is dear." And so also with sons, wealth, Brāhmaṇas, Kṣhatriyas, the worlds, the Gods, the Vedas, the elements, until: "Lo! not for the sake of the All is the All dear, but for the sake of the Self the All is dear."¹ The Self seeks the Self, and this is the universal search for happiness, ever frustrated by the clash of form with form, the obstruction of the vehicles in which the separated selves abide.

¹ Brhadāranyakopaniṣat, VI, v, 6.

In order to draw out devotion, then, an object which is attractive must be presented to man, and we find such objects presented most completely in the revelations of the Supreme Self made through human form in the "God-Men" who appear from time to time—the Avatāras, or Divine Incarnations. Such beings are rendered supremely attractive by the beauty of character they manifest, by the rays of the Self which shine through the human veil, imperfectly concealing their divine loveliness. When He who is Beauty and Love and Bliss shows a little portion of Himself on earth, encased in human form, the weary eyes of men light up, the tired hearts of men expand, with a new hope, a new vigour. They are irresistibly attracted to Him; devotion spontaneously springs up. Among Christians the intensity of religious devotion flows out to Christ, the Divine Man regarded as an incarnation of Deity, far more than to "God" in the abstract. It is His human side, His life and death, His sympathy and compassion, His gentle wisdom and patient sufferings, which stir men's hearts to a passion of devotion; as the "Man of Sorrows," the innocent and willing Sufferer, He wins perennially the love of men; it is the memory of Him as Man that holds men captive; as phrased by one of His devotees:

The Cross of Christ
Is more to us than all His miracles.

And so in the God-Men of other faiths; it is Shri Rāma the Divine King, Shri Kṛṣṇa the Friend and Lover, who win the undying, passionate devotion of millions of human hearts. They render Deity attractive by softening its dazzling radiance into a light that human eyes can bear as it shines through the veil of humanity; they limit the divine attributes till they become small enough for the human intelligence to grasp. These stand as Objects of devotion, attracting love by Their perfect loveliness; They need only to be seen to be loved; where They are not loved it is merely because They are not seen. Devotion to Divine Men is not a matter for discussion or for argument; the moment one of Them is seen by the inner vision, the heart rushes out to Him and falls unbidden at His feet. Devotion may be cultivated by the reason, may be approved of and nurtured by the intelligence; but its primary impulse comes from the heart, not from the head, and flows out spontaneously to the Object that attracts it, to the shining of the Self through a translucent veil, to the Heart's Desire in manifested form.

Next, as objects of devotion, come the Teachers who, having Themselves obtained liberation, remain voluntarily within touch of humanity, retaining human bodies while the Jīvātmā enjoys nirvāṇic consciousness. They stand, as it were, between

the Avatāras and the earthly teachers who are Their disciples, and who have not yet reached liberation; but to the eyes of men on earth They are scarce distinguishable from the Avatāras Themselves, and They draw men with the same overmastering attraction. The Avatāra truly is greater, but that greatness lies on the side turned away from earth, and we can imagine no completer perfection than that of the Masters of the Wisdom.

Then come, in more constant physical communication with men, the teachers who are the immediate spiritual guides of those whose faces are turned to the steep path that leads to the heights, to the snowy mountains of human perfection. Still marred by weaknesses though they be, these have advanced sufficiently beyond their fellow-men to serve as their guides and helpers; and for the most part the earlier stages of progress are trodden by devotion to them. Further, as they are near the threshold of liberation, they will shortly pass into the class beyond them, and, as spiritual links are imperishable, will then be able, with added force, to draw their devotees after them. Love given to them strengthens and expands the nature of their lovers, and there is no surer path to devotion, in its highest meaning, than the love and trust given to the earthly teacher. Nowhere has this been realised so

strongly as in the East, where the love and service of the teacher have ever been held as necessary to spiritual progress. Much of the decay of modern India is due to the ignorance, the pride, the unspirituality of those who still wear the ancient name while devoid of all the qualities once implied by it; for as the best wine makes the sharpest vinegar, so is the degradation of the highest the lowest depth.

How shall devotion, then, be evoked and nourished? Only by meeting in the outer or inner world a fit object of devotion, and by yielding fully and unreservedly to the attraction it exercises. The glad and cordial recognition of excellence wherever found, the checking of the critical and carping spirit that fixes on defects and ignores virtues, these things prepare the soul to recognise his teacher when he appears. Many a one misses his teacher by the mental habit of fixing the attention on blemishes rather than on beauties, by seeing only the sun-spots and not the Sun. Further, the recognition of excellence shows the capacity to reproduce it; sympathetic vibrations are given out only by a string tuned to produce by itself a similar note; the soul knows his kin, even though they be older than himself, and only those akin to greatness are wakened by the great to response.

When the teacher is found and the tie with him is made, the first great step is taken. Then follows the steady culture of devotion to him, and through him to Those beyond and to the Supreme Self, manifested in form. This must never be forgotten, for the teacher is a means not an end, a transmitter not an originator of the divine light, a moon not a sun. He helps, strengthens, guides, evolves his pupil; but the end is the shining out of the Self in the disciple, the Self who is one, and is in teacher and disciple alike.

Devotion to the embodiment of the Self spoken of as the Avatāra may be nourished and increased by reading and meditating on His sayings and the incidents of His life on earth. It is a good plan to read over an incident and then vividly picture it in the mind, using the imagination to produce a full and detailed picture, and feeling one's self as present in it, a spectator or an actor therein. This "scientific use of the imagination" is a great provocative of devotion, and it actually brings the devotee into touch with the scene depicted; so that he may one day find himself scanning the ākāshic record of the event, a very part of that living picture, learning undreamed-of lessons from his presence there.

Another way of cultivating devotion is to be much in company with those in whom devotion

burns more brightly than in ourselves. As burning wood thrown into a smouldering fire will cause a flame to burst out brightly again, so the nearness of the warm fire of devotion in another rekindles the flagging energy of a weaker soul. Here again the disciple may gain much by frequenting the company of his teacher whose steadier force will energise his own. Nārada, in his admirable Sūtras, thus instructs us on the culture of devotion, and who should teach better than that ideal devotee?

Almost needless to add that the direct contemplation of, meditation on, and adoration of, the object of devotion quicken and intensify the love. In the hurry of modern life we are apt to forget the power of quiet thought, and to grudge the time necessary for its exercise. Thought of the one we love increases love, and the would-be devotee must give time to the object of his devotion; and it is not his thought alone that is at work. As little can a plant grow without sunlight, as devotion without the warming and energising rays that stream from its object; the older soul pours out far more love than he receives, and his light and heat permeate and strengthen the younger soul. The teacher loves his disciple, and God loves His devotee, far more than the disciple loves his teacher, or the devotee his God. The love of the devotee for

his Lord is but a faint reflection of the love of Him who is Love itself. It is said that if a child throws a pebble to the ground, the whole great earth moves towards the pebble as well as draws the pebble to itself; attraction cannot be one-sided. In the spiritual world when man makes one step towards God, God makes a hundred steps towards man, for greatness there means greatness in giving, and the ocean pours forth its measureless depths towards any drop that seeks its bosom.

Having seen what devotion is, what its objects are, how it can be increased, we may fitly measure its value so as to find motive for attaining it.

Devotion changes the devotee into the likeness of the one he loves. Solomon, the wise Hebrew, declares that "as a man thinks so he is". The *Chhāṇḍogyopaniṣhaṭ* teaches that "man is created by thought; what he thinks of, that he becomes". But the intellect alone cannot easily be shaped into the likeness of the Supreme. As cold iron is hard, and incapable of being worked, but heated in the furnace becomes fluid and flows readily into any desired mould, so is it with the intellect. It must be melted in the fire of devotion, and then it will quickly be shaped into the likeness of the Beloved. Even love between equals, where it is strong and faithful

and long-continued, moulds them into each other's likeness; husband and wife become like each other, close friends grow similar each to each. And love directed to one above us exercises its transforming power still more forcibly, and easily shapes the nature it renders plastic into the likeness which is enshrined in the heart.

Devotion prevents the making of new karma, and when the old is exhausted the devotee is free. The great Christian teacher, S. Paul, writing of himself, declared that he no longer lived but Christ lived in him; and this saying becomes true of each devotee as his devotion leads him to surrender himself utterly to the one he loves. He thinks of his body not as his, but as an instrument used by his Lord for the world's helping; all his actions are done because they are the duty given him by his Beloved; does he eat, it is not to gratify the palate, but to keep in working order his Lord's instrument; does he think, it is not for the pleasure of thinking, but in order that his Lord's work may be the better done; he merges his life in the life he loves, thinks, works, acts, in union with that higher life, merging his smaller rill of being in the larger stream, and finding a deep joy in feeling himself part of the fuller life. So it is written: "Whatsoever thou doest, whatsoever thou eatest, whatsoever thou offerest, whatsoever thou

givest, whatsoever thou doest of austerity, O son of Kuntī, do thou that as an offering unto Me. Thus shalt thou be liberated from the bonds of action (yielding) good and evil fruits" (*Bhagavad-Gītā*, ix, 27, 28). Where fruits of action are not desired, where actions are done only as sacrifice, no karma is made by the actor, and he is not bound by them to the wheel of births and deaths.

Devotion cleanses the heart. Once again Shri Kṛṣṇa teaches us, and the words at first seem strange: "Even if the most sinful worship me with undivided heart, he too must be accounted righteous." Why?—we naturally ask; and the answer comes: "Because he hath rightly resolved; *speedily he becometh dutiful*, and goeth to peace eternal" (*Ibid.*, 30, 31). In the higher world men are judged by motives not by actions, by inner attitude not by external signs. When a man feels devotion to the Supreme, he has turned his back on evil and has turned his face to the goal; he may stumble, stray, even fall, but his face is turned in the right direction, he is going homewards; he must needs become dutiful by the force of his devotion, for seeking union with his Beloved he will swiftly cast away everything that prevents the union; to Him who sees the end from the beginning he is righteous when his face is turned to righteousness; his love

will burn up in him the evil that veils from him the Being he adores, and produce in him the likeness that he worships. So sure is this action, so inviolable the law, that he is "accounted righteous". Of the two great classes of the self-seekers and the seekers of the Self, he has changed from the first into the second.

Devotion puts an end to pain. That which we do for the object of our love is done with joy, and pain is merged in gladness when it is endured for the sake of one we love. The mere earthly lover will gladly undergo hardships, perils, sufferings, to win approval from, or to gain something desirable for, his beloved. Why should not the one who has caught a glimpse of the beauty of the Self do joyfully all that brings him nearer to union, sacrifice ungrudgingly, nay, with delight, all that withholds him from the bridal of the inner life? For the sake of being with one we love, we readily endure inconvenience, sacrifice comfort, the joy of the presence of the loved one lending charm to the surmounting of all obstacles that separate. Thus devotion makes hard things easy, and painful things pleasant. For love is the world-chemist and transmutes all to gold.

Devotion gives peace. The heart at peace in the Self is at peace with all. The devotee sees the Self in all; all forms around him bear the

impress of the Beloved. How then can he hate or despise or repel any, when the Face he loves smiles at him behind every mask? "Sages look with equal eye on a Brāhmaṇa adorned with learning and humility, on a cow, an elephant, and even a dog and a dog-eater" (*Bhagavad-Gītā*, v, 18). No one, nothing, can be outside the heart of the devotee, since nothing is outside the embrace of his Lord. If we love the very objects touched by the one we love, how shall we not love all forms in which the Beloved is enshrined? A child in his play may draw over his laughing face a hideous mask, but the mother knows her darling is underneath; and when in the world-līlā the Lord is hidden under forms repulsive, His lovers are not repelled, but see only Him. There is no creature, moving or unmoving, that exists bereft of Him, and in the heart-chamber of the vilest sinner the Holiest abides.

Thus we return to our starting-point and learn to recognise the devotee by his aspect to his fellow-creatures. His abounding love, his tenderness, his compassion, his pity, his sympathy with all faiths and all ideals, these mark him out as a lover of the Lord of Love. It is told of Shri Rāmānujāchārya that a manṭra was once given him by his Guru, and he asked what would happen if he told it to another: "Thou wilt

die," was the answer. "And what will happen to the one who hears it?" "He will be liberated." Then out ran the devotee of Shri Kṛṣṇa, and, flying to the top of a tower, he shouted out the manṭra to the crowded streets below, careless what happened to himself so that others should be set free from sin and sorrow. There is the typical devotee, there the lover transformed into the likeness of the Beloved.
